Bread in English History

Ye Baker's Oven

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INTRODUCTION

FROM time immemorial bread has been the most important food of man. Throughout history its distribution has been the chief concern of Kings and Governments. A shortage of bread has led to revolutions and the downfall of empires. A great deal of the legislation of the world has been devoted to ensuring an adequate supply of bread to the people.

It is still the most important food in the world.

There are many other cereals than wheat—maize, rye, rice and others—and although some of these have been used for bread-making, the advance of civilisation has always replaced them by bread as we understand it, that is bread made from wheat. Each of the other cereals is lacking in some particular of value and their consumption leads to a general lowering of vitality and energy. It is not for nothing that bread has throughout the ages been regarded as the Staff of Life, and the collection of historical references included in this book, together with many interesting illustrations, will help to show the extreme importance of bread as a food.

To-day science has been able to produce many unnatural foods, sometimes attractive, often palatable, but never of the same value as the natural foods, such as bread, milk and farm produce as opposed to factory produce.

The natural foods are the only health-giving foods. As history shows, rulers have always been aware of the extreme importance of bread to the nation, and to-day there is even greater need for making the basis of our feeding, bread made from wheat and for which there has never been and can never be any satisfactory substitute.

BREAD LAWS OF THE MIDDLE AGES

BREAD is the most important food of all civilised peoples; no other grain, whether rye, barley, oats, maize or rice, having such sustaining and nutritive value as wheat.

Cheap and plentiful food means a happy and contented nation. The rulers of England, therefore, from very early times, did what they could to keep the price of bread low, or—as they would have said—to fix the "just price" of bread, according to the price of wheat.

To-day, it is the miller who buys wheat and grinds it into flour to sell to the baker to make into bread; but in the Middle Ages, the baker bought wheat and took it to the miller to be ground. The miller was paid for his work with a certain amount of the flour.

The price of wheat changed every year. It was very high when the weather was bad and the harvest poor, and low when the harvest was good. Prices were different in different parts of the country. When the harvest was good in the South, for instance, wheat might be cheap in, say, Hampshire and Sussex, while the weather might have been very bad in the North, and the harvest a failure; then the price of corn would be high in Lancashire and Cheshire.

The price of bread, therefore, was fixed by the Justices of the Peace in each county. But they did not do it, as perhaps you would expect, by saying, simply, that the price of bread must be so much a pound. The *price* of the loaves remained the same, but their *weight* was changed. Loaves were usually sold at a penny, a half-penny and a farthing each, and the baker was always expected to make 418 pounds of bread out of every quarter of wheat. There were several different kinds of bread.

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THE ASSIZE OF BREAD.

THE Justices fixed what the weights of the different priced loaves were to be, at an "Assay" or "Assize of Bread" held in large towns all over the country. It was a very important occasion. In the records of the City

PRESENTING BREAD SPECIALLY BAKED *for the* ASSIZE

of London there is an exact account, in quaint, old-fashioned wording, of the way in which the Assize was held in that City.

" According to the custom of the City of London " the writer says, " an Assay of Bread ought to be made after the Feast of St. Michael in each year, by four discreet men, chosen and sworn thereunto ; and according to the weight set by such assay, the bakers ought to bake throughout the whole of that year.

"The four men are to buy three quarters of corn, one upon the pavement in Chepe, one at Gracechurch or at Billingsgate, and a third at Queen-Hythe; of which corn they are to make wastel *(best white) light bread and brown bread. And after, with great diligence, they shall have baked such loaves they shall present them, while hot, to the Mayor and Aldermen at the Guildhall; and then while so hot, such loaves shall be weighed.*

"Then shall be reckoned the price at which the corn aforesaid was bought, and there shall be allowed for expenses, as to each quarter, the sum of eightpence. And if there shall be more loaves in number than there are halfpennies in the purchase price after the expenses have been allowed for, the weight of the loaves forming such surplus shall be distributed among the remaining loaves; and so every loaf will be of the proper weight;" the writer adds wisely, *"and observe, that when the quarter of corn is dear, you will have more loaves made out of a quarter and of less weight. But when it is cheap you will have fewer loaves, but of greater weight."*

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THE STORY OF OUR WEIGHTS AND MEASURES.

It seems strange that for hundreds of years, no one thought of holding the Assize in a way which would be easier for everyone to understand. But in the Middle Ages, arithmetic was not as simple at it is now; the figures we use were not used in this country till later, and weights and measures were strange. For instance, what do you think this means? It is taken from the Assize of Bread in the reign of Henry III.

"When wheat sells at 12 pence the quarter, the farthing loaf shall weigh as follows: Wastel *(or best white bread) six pounds, sixteen shillings!"*

The explanation is that our avoirdupois table of weights and measures (which is the one you probably know best)

was not used at all until the fourteenth century. If you look at your " tables " you will see one named " Troy " weight. This was the table used in the Middle Ages and for long afterwards for " wheat, bread, gold, silver, pearls and *other precious* things." (Bread and wheat, you see, were among the really precious things.)

Our " Troy " table is very short, but in the days of Edward I it was longer. A law of those days says : " the English penny, which is called a sterling, ought to weigh 32 grains of wheat. And the ounce ought to weigh 20 pennies and 12 ounces make the London pound, that is to say, 20 shillings sterling."

From this you see where the " grains " and " penny-weights " in our Troy table to-day come from. Corn was, indeed, used as a measure of length, as well as of weight ; for example 3 barleycorns = 1 inch.

There are many kinds of history, and in the Middle Ages, the history of our Arithmetic was just beginning. There were several different " pounds " of weight in use, e.g. the " Tower " pound, the "Merchants " pound, the " Troy " pound and later " Avoirdupois " as well as others used only in certain parts of the country. It must have been very confusing at the time.

PUNISHMENTS *for* BREAKING THE BREAD LAWS

NOW, although you do not often read about it in your history books, the Assize of Bread was one of the most important laws of the Middle Ages. Many people who had never heard of Magna Charta complained bitterly if the Assize of Bread were not " kept," that is, if the bakers sold loaves which weighed too little. It was not, however, very easy for the most honest bakers to keep the law and at the same time to make a profit, firstly, because the profit which they were allowed by law was very small, and, secondly because bread loses weight while it is being cooked, and again after it is cooked.

But people who bought loaves which were underweight had no mercy on the bakers and even complained if the Sheriff let the baker off with a fine. In Coventry, in 1387, " the common people rose and threw loaves at the Mayor's head, because the bakers kept not the Assize, neither did the Mayor punish them according to his office."

The punishments laid down by the law were—like most punishments in those days—rather barbarous and harsh. The pillory and the hurdle were common. " *In the 4th year of Edward II* " *we read in the records of London,* " *a baker named John, of Stratford, for making bread less than the Assize, was with a fool's hood on his head and loaves of bread about his neck, drawn on a hurdle through the streets of the city.*" The hurdle was pulled by one or two horses ; it was low on the ground and instead of wheels rough blocks of wood were fixed underneath so that they would catch on the cobbles. A public

PAYING A FINE TO THE SHERIFF.

"HE SHALL BE DRAWN THRO' THE GREAT STREETS ON A HURDLE WITH A WHEEL ,OR WITHOUT"

journey over the cobbled, dirty streets of a mediæval town must have been punishment enough, but, in addition, all the culprit's enemies, including his customers, were free to take their revenge by jeering or pelting him with anything at hand. In bad cases the bread of an offending baker was often taken and given away to the poor.

Many people brought their dough to the baker to be baked in his oven for a small payment (probably made in dough). This custom tempted some bakers to a very curious and elaborate form of cheating. The dough was put, by the customer, on a table or " moulding-board " in the bakehouse, but unknown to him, a small trap-door had been made in the table, and hidden underneath it sat a servant of the baker who opened the trap and scooped out as much of the customer's dough at he thought safe—" to the scandal and disgrace of the whole city " the writer ends. Nine bakers were found guilty of this offence at one time and were punished by being put in the pillory " with a certain quantity of the same dough hung from their necks until Vespers at St. Paul's in London should be ended."

One offence sometimes leads to another ; there is an amusing story of one, Ralph atte Sele, who had been drawn upon the hurdle with a short-weight loaf around his neck, who, in the quaint words of the record, " went to divers bakers at divers times and showed them a loaf, saying he had been unjustly punished, and that his loaf was, at the time it was weighed, old, cold and mouldy and was not hot

when it was weighed, as of right it ought to be." (It was the law that bread should be weighed hot.) However, it was proved that the loaf had been hot when it was weighed, but that Ralph had disappeared in the meantime and could not be found for a fortnight ; so the loaf had become mouldy by the time his punishment was carried out. Ralph was then sentenced to the pillory for an hour " with a whetstone hung from his neck " for slandering the Mayor and Aldermen.

It is only fair to add that many of the rules were made and many of the punishments were ordered by the Bakers' own guild which insisted on good work from its members.

There were similar punishments for sending up the price of corn by unfair tricks.

OLD ENGLISH MARKETS.

In the Middle Ages people believed that everything should be sold in public, in the market, where all would have an equal chance of buying. So prices would be steady and cheating would be discovered more easily. It was ordered, for example, that " no baker shall sell bread in his own house, or before his oven ; but he shall have a basket with his bread in the market of his lordship the King, so that, in case the bread, according to the market price of corn, be not of full weight," the baker might be more easily found.

Corn was sold in the same simple manner ; the farmer or the city dealer brought his sacks of grain into the corn market, leaving them open at the mouth ; buying and selling was then done on the spot.

There was a fixed time for opening the market, or beginning to buy and sell, and no baker was allowed to enter " the Churchyard of Saint Michael (on Cornhill) or the market of Westchepe, Gracechurch, Billingsgate,

Botulphswarf, or Queen-Hythe, or to go on board of any vessel to buy corn, before Prime is rung." (Six o'clock in the morning, rung at St. Paul's.) London children will recognize these names. They were famous corn-markets in the Middle Ages.

It was common before the days of railways for grain to come to London and other ports by sea, from country districts in England.

PELTED THE MAYOR WITH LOAVES OF STALE BREAD

ENGLISH FAMINES *of the* MIDDLE AGES

NOWADAYS we do not live only on corn grown in England, where the weather is very uncertain and the harvests are often poor. Every year, large quantities come to us from North or South America and from Australia and New Zealand, and other parts of the world. But none of these great wheatfields of the world was discovered until the end of the Middle Ages. And even after the discovery of America it was hundreds of years before corn came to England from that part of the world.

In the Middle Ages, therefore, the English people had to live on the corn grown at home, and when this was destroyed by bad weather, as it so often was, a great many people starved.

We read that " In 1258, a great dearth followed the wet year past, for a quarter of wheat was sold for 15 shillings and 20 shillings [the usual price about that time was 4 to 6 shillings], but the worst was in the end, there could be none found for money, wherethrough many poor people were constrained to eat barks of trees, and horseflesh, but many starved for want of food."

BRINGING CORN TO LONDON.

And in 1394 " was a great dearth in all parts of England. A man might see infants and children in streets and houses,

STARVING PEOPLE STRIPPING TREES OF THEIR BARK.

through hunger, crying and craving bread, whose mothers had it not, God wot, to break unto them."

In 1439, when " by reason of great tempests, raging winds and rain " there was great scarcity of corn, the Lord Mayor of London sent ships to Prussia for rye to take the place of wheat. In some parts of the country that year " the poor distressed people that were hunger-bitten made them bread of fern-roots."

MARKET OF CH

APSIDE IN 1400

HIGH PRICES *and* RIOTS

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.

AS time went on, better ways of farming were invented, so that more corn was grown on every acre of ground. Trading improved, too, and some corn was imported from the Baltic lands and other countries where it was plentiful. But years of scarcity, when bread was very dear, did not come to an end, and during the last half of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th, there were very bad times for the poor people.

They did not suffer in silence, and, even when harvests were good, there was often rioting in country places against the export of corn.

In 1735, there were " uncommon scenes of blood and violence " in the little town of Penryn, in Cornwall, where the tin miners broke into the granaries of a corn-merchant whom they accused of storing grain to send abroad, where a higher price could be obtained.

Such scenes often took place in the North and West of England, where the weather is uncertain. The people were angry when they saw their most precious food being sent out of the country, for they were always afraid that this would lead to scarcity and high prices.

Between 1756 and 1773, years of bad weather followed each other ; from 1766 to 1774 there were only two really good harvests. The price of bread rose higher and higher.

The people of England were changing. Manufacturing towns were growing up, crowded with people who grew no

THEY STOPPED THE KING'S COACH

food for themselves, but must be fed by the country-people. When prices rose, rioting began, and the riots were often very serious. Mobs attacked mills, farm-houses and corn-dealers' buildings, and once, because some of the dealers were Quakers, three Quaker meeting-houses were nearly destroyed. People were killed in these riots and troops were called out to put them down. Sometimes the rioters were very harshly punished, being transported or even hanged. At other times the magistrates themselves were so sorry for the starving men that they let them off as lightly as they could.

At the end of the eighteenth century came the French Revolution and the long wars with Napoleon. At the same time there happened to be another long spell of bad harvests. The war and the bad weather together caused great scarcity and very high prices again. The price of the quartern loaf in London was 1/5 at a time when very many men earned no more than 10/– a week and many families lived on even less. The poor blamed the corn dealers, who bought up corn to sell again to bakers and others, but they also attacked the bakers' shops, plundering them and stealing the bread and flour. More sensibly, they blamed the war, and once, in 1795 the crowd attacked the King's carriage as he was on his way to speak at the opening of Parliament. A shot was fired into the carriage, while the mob shouted, "Peace! Peace!"

SAVING FLOUR.

IN these times of scarcity, some strange suggestions were made with the object of helping people to save bread and flour. "THE TIMES," in 1795 printed this list of Rules for the Rich. It was followed by a similar list intended for the poor, and was headed :

THE WAY TO PEACE AND PLENTY.

1. Abolish all gravy soups and second courses.
2. Buy no starch when wheat is dear.
3. Destroy all useless dogs.
4. Give no dog or other animal, the *smallest* piece of bread or flour.
5. Save all your skim-milk carefully and give it all to the poor or sell it at a cheap rate.
6. Make broth, rice pudding, etc., for the poor and teach them to make such things.

The list ended rather suddenly—

7. Go to Church.

People were advised to make no pastry or pie-crust and it was suggested that imitation pie-crust of plaster or china might be used to cover pies, instead of the real thing !

Hair-powder, which was already going out of fashion was disapproved, because it was generally made of flour. Several regiments which gave up using it at this time, were praised by "THE TIMES" for their patriotism.

No new bread was to be sold, "four stale loaves being equal to five new loaves," and bakers were ordered to use potato or rice flour or any of the cheaper kinds of corn in making bread. This mixed bread, however, which was marked with the letter M, was never popular with the poorer people. The rich blamed them for this, but perhaps because bread formed a much greater part of the poor man's daily food, he was always less ready than the rich to agree to its being changed for the worse. The day was past when the poor were contented with "black bread" made of rye, or even "horse-bread" made of beans, which they had often been glad to eat in the Middle Ages.

RIOTS AGAINST MACHINERY.

Riots were not always against high prices ; when the wars with Napoleon were over, there was much unemployment in England among farm labourers as well as among spinners and other factory workers. New machinery had been invented which did some of the work of cutting and threshing the corn, which had always been done by hand until then. The labourers, of course, blamed these new machines for their unemployment. Bands of unemployed labourers would wander about the countryside breaking up all the machines they found, and burning ricks and even destroying crops as they went.

There is a curious story of how " Coke of Norfolk," the first Earl of Leicester, a very well-known land-owner and a clever farmer, met one of these mobs one day and got the better of the men. He was 77 at the time and was riding on horseback near his home when he saw a large gang armed with bludgeons and crow-bars. " Riding up to them, he drew rein in their pathway and asked how they *dared* disturb the countryside in such a disgraceful manner. The men, astounded, hesitated and were lost. Before they had time to collect their wits, Coke got off his horse, seized two of the ring-leaders by the collar and all the while rating them soundly for their conduct, signed to his carriage to drive up. So completely was the mob paralysed by this bold move that they actually suffered four of their party to be placed in the coach and driven off to gaol ; no more machinery was destroyed on his estate, and the neighbourhood was thenceforward completely deserted by the insurgents."

Another cause of the riots which took place during the first half of the eighteenth century was the bitter feeling against the Corn Laws.

CORN LAWS

BEFORE 1660 (the year of the Restoration) most of the English laws about Corn and Bread were intended to make it possible for anyone to be able to buy bread at a fair price.

The Corn Laws before 1660, tried to prevent unnecessary scarcity and high prices by forbidding anyone to send corn abroad unless it was extremely plentiful and very cheap. Even when corn was so cheap that it was lawful to send it abroad, the King often forbade export because he was asked to do so by the rulers of the City of London, who were always afraid of lack of bread in their crowded town.

Importing of corn was allowed until that time.

But after 1660 a great change took place. The government wanted to please the landowners and their tenants, the farmers ; instead of saying that corn must not be sent

AGITATORS ADDRESSING THE MOB

abroad unless it was *very* plentiful and cheap, the laws now said that corn *might* be exported *unless* the price became very high ; at the same time a heavy duty (or tax) was placed on corn coming into the country.

These laws helped the landowners because they were able to depend on getting a good price for their corn, and therefore they grew more corn than they would have done otherwise. But the poor hated to see corn being sent abroad and did all they could to prevent it. However, at that time, no one thought that England would ever be able to depend on foreign corn. They believed that it was really necessary to encourage the farmer to grow as much wheat as he possibly could, so that there would be enough bread for everyone.

The Corn Laws became a really exciting part of our history in the middle of the eighteenth century. From that time they were argued over, attacked ferociously by one side and defended just as fiercely by the other side, written about, rioted about, talked about in Parliament, for nearly a hundred years.

No one was clever enough to think of a way of giving the farmer a high price for his corn every year, and at the same time keeping the price of good white bread low enough for the very poor to buy.

Riots against the Corn Laws often took place. Mobs went about carrying banners or poles with small loaves spiked on them, and men who were known to be in favour of the Corn Laws were stoned and beaten in the streets or market-places. But most of the attacks on the Corn Laws were carried on in Parliament or at public meetings. Thousands of pamphlets and books and letters to newspapers were written by people of all classes. There was even a " Corn Law Poet," Ebenezer Elliot, who wrote " Corn Law Rhymes," which were very popular, though, to tell the truth, they were very bad poetry.

An Anti-Corn Law League was formed in 1838, the first of those six years of bad crops, unemployment and terrible suffering among the poor people which led to the expression " The Hungry Forties." The hero of the Anti-Corn Law League was Richard Cobden, who at last persuaded the Prime Minister, Peel, as well as a great many other people, that the time had come to abolish the Corn Laws and to allow corn to come freely into the country.

His work was done at the right time. His speeches and the League prepared the way. The end came quite suddenly. A very bad harvest in England in 1845 was followed by the complete failure of the potato crop in Ireland. The Irish, whose chief food at that time was

potatoes, were only saved from starvation—and many of them were not saved—by importing large quantities of foreign wheat.

The Irish famine put an end to the Corn Laws. As the old Duke of Wellington said : " Rotten potatoes have done it all." The Corn Laws came to an end in 1846.

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THE GREAT WAR

SINCE the middle of the nineteenth century, England gradually used more and more foreign corn. The old sailing-ships were improved so that they could travel much faster than before, while the newly invented steam-ships could bring corn in good condition from the other side of the world. From the year 1866 corn was brought to England even from Australia in the fast sailing-ships or "Windjammers " as well as in steamships ; and from countries nearer home corn came in regularly. By 1913 England was importing four-fifths of the wheat consumed, much of it coming from other parts of the British Empire.

YEARLY RACE OF GRAIN SHIPS from AUSTRALIA TO ENGLAND . . .

So when the Great War with Germany broke out in 1914 England was living on food which came mostly from abroad, instead of on corn and other food grown at home, as she had done in the days of the wars with Napoleon.

During the first few days after war was declared, many people, in a panic rushed to buy up food for themselves, and the first thing they generally bought was flour. However, these "food-hogs" as they were called at the time, soon learnt to be ashamed of themselves, and food-hoarding did not go on for long.

For some time no one in England suffered very much from shortage of bread or flour. The price of bread went up from about 6d. (it was as low as $4\frac{1}{2}$d. in some districts) to $8\frac{1}{4}$d. and later to 9d. the quartern loaf, but wages went up at the same time. No one expected the war to go on for very long at first, and there were very good supplies of wheat in the country in 1914.

But by 1917 things had become very much more serious. The price of bread rose to $11\frac{1}{2}$d. before the Government fixed it at 9d. The German submarines had sunk hundreds of our ships, which could not be rebuilt during the war. Not only were the cargoes in them lost, but ships themselves became scarce. Meat, sugar and butter were rationed and people were asked to ration themselves in bread. Some of the suggestions made during the Napoleonic wars were repeated, and, this time, millers were *ordered* to mix other flour with wheat flour. Rice, maize, barley, rye and

oats were mixed with the wheat, and the bread which was made from these mixtures probably caused more grumbling than anything else that civilians had to suffer during the war. By 1914, English people, rich and poor, had become so accustomed to good, cheap bread, that they could not believe that even war should make any difference to the supply.

CONVOY OF GRAIN SHIPS COMING UP CHANNEL
1917 - 1918

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